



London Communities Human Rights Programme

LONDON VOICES: THE HUMAN RIGHTS REALITY OF PEOPLE LIVING IN LONDON

justfair

The British Institute
of Human Rights



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INTRODUCTION

From November 2023 to February 2024, Just Fair and the British Institute of Human Rights held four human rights 'open days' across London as part of the London Human Rights Communities Programme.

- 4 sessions
- 64 attendees
- 4 areas of London (Southwark, Shoreditch, Finsbury Park, Hammersmith)
- 14 hours spent together

Over the sessions, we spoke to organisations, organisers and local authority staff about the day-to-day experiences of their communities and their work supporting all Londoners to live full and dignified lives. In this resource we share what they told us about the experience of human rights in London and map these issues to human rights law.

All too often, London is pointed to as the economic success story of the UK with many believing London is given disproportionate investment from central government, but this is far from the everyday reality for the people and communities we spoke to. In every meeting, we heard about overarching challenges faced by communities in London to accessing and enjoying their human rights including:



- Increasing poverty and inequality faced across communities and within specific communities;
- Lack of funding for community and public services and the contracting out of these services to organisations with weak links to the communities they exist to support;
- Reduced and, at times, ineffective support from public authorities to offset the impacts of this poverty and inequality;
- Discrimination in access to public services based on addiction, disability, homelessness, race and mental health issues, language and asylum or immigration status;
- A lack of awareness of human rights in communities and an exhaustion from advocating for basic rights.

We hope that this resource will support understanding of these issues as human rights issues, strengthening the power of communities to advocate for their rights when interacting with services and decision makers. We also hope this resource can be used as evidence in policy and campaigns of the very real human rights issues faced by people in London.

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Part 1: What we heard:

- increasing poverty and inequality, reduced support from local and public authorities , health and social care inequalities.

Part 2: A rights response:

- the right to health, to well-being and to non-discrimination and the right to an adequate standard of living, to dignity and to enjoy your current home and environment.



PART 1: WHAT WE HEARD: THE RIGHTS ISSUES FACED BY LONDON COMMUNITIES

INCREASING POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

At all the open meetings, we heard how the **cost-of-living crisis** is pulling more and more people into **poverty**. Though the cost-of-living crisis has impacted us all, we know that some households find it easier to cut back than others. Those with the lowest incomes have been the most affected by the rising cost of living and many are struggling to make ends meet. **Over 25% of London's population - more than two million Londoners - are living in poverty**, over half of whom are employed. A further 1.5 million Londoners do not have incomes adequate to provide a minimum socially acceptable standard of living.

"IT'S JUST EXPECTED THAT PEOPLE CANNOT AFFORD TO LIVE COMFORTABLY" - OPEN DAY PARTICIPANT

UK Government spending cuts (known as austerity), followed by the Covid-19 pandemic and a subsequent (and ongoing) cost-of-living crisis, alongside legal reforms that endanger our rights and dismantle the ways in which we can hold the UK Government and public services to account have presented cumulative challenges to our human rights and those who fight for them. Across London, **individuals experiencing injustice are tired, and organisations and organisers are burnt out**.

"THE STRESS OF POVERTY IS MAKING PEOPLE SICK." - OPEN DAY PARTICIPANT

In London, this looks like more individuals living in or on the edge of poverty – including **poverty of opportunity and aspiration** – working unstable jobs in the **gig economy**, living in **expensive, overcrowded housing**. Four in ten people in London do not meet an acceptable standard of living.

"JOBS ARE NOT PAYING ENOUGH FOR PEOPLE TO LIVE ON." - OPEN DAY PARTICIPANT

For communities, this looks like more groups needing to prioritise and respond to the cost of living crisis to ensure the basic human needs of their communities. Groups are having to take up the role of **crisis managers and sign-posters**, engaging in **anti-poverty work** alongside their normal services, and setting up **foodbanks**.

ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE FOOD

Food was on the minds of our session attendees, and **charitable food aid** was a hot topic. In Southwark, campaigners, including food bank volunteers, dissected issues such as the normalisation of food banks. They shared the positives and negatives of attempting to solve the issue of food poverty through the redistribution of wasted, surplus food.

They spoke to not only the challenges food bank users are facing, but the wider picture and their role as organisations. Essentially, weighing up **the need to fight against the normalisation of food banks** as a solution to food poverty, with the need to reach as many people who may need food as possible without shame or stigma.

NOT EXPERIENCED EQUALLY

Across our open days we heard that issues such as poverty and access to affordable food are not being experienced equally across the population. Rather, there are specific groups and communities of people who more frequently face barriers and these same groups can also face multiple and intersecting barriers. Poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage act to compound the disadvantage and marginalisation faced, making it even harder to live free from discrimination and enjoy our rights.

A CPAG report called London Calling: Stretched too far echoed what community groups told us, that Black and minority ethnic groups are more likely to live in poverty:

- 46 per cent of children from Black and minority ethnic groups are living in poverty, compared with 31 per cent of all children.
- 39% per cent of Black and minority ethnic Londoners live in poverty, compared with 21 per cent of white Londoners.

REDUCED SUPPORT FROM LOCAL AND PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

At the same time public authorities – including local councils and other services contracted by councils – are experiencing drastic budget cuts and are not providing the services and support they once did.¹ As well as not providing the same services, we heard that those services that are provided don't always fit as a solution to the problems communities face.

“[SOME OF OUR COMMUNITY] CAN'T JUST DROP EVERYTHING AND SCRAMBLE TO CALL THE GP SURGERY AS SOON AS IT OPENS, SO THEY JUST DON'T GET SEEN BY THE DOCTORS.” – OPEN DAY PARTICIPANT

Attendees spoke of the challenges of interacting with parts of the state which are also struggling – **the gaps in provision, sticking-plaster reforms, and a need to constantly reassert the 'worthiness' of their claims to rights** and services we are all entitled to.

At our open days, we heard about the **growing gaps between lived experience and the experiences policies speak to**, caused by communities and organisations being left out of **processes which should be participatory**.

“THERE'S TOO MUCH TALK AND NOT ENOUGH ACTION. [DECISION MAKERS] DON'T LISTEN TO US.” – OPEN DAY PARTICIPANT

In London, this looks like **gaps in asylum support** that lead to re-traumatisation and ill health, **substandard accommodation** that makes people sick. It looks like **poor access to affordable and healthy food**, and **overworked schools**. It looks like a **lack of wraparound care** for our children, cuts to legal aid and increasingly challenging **wait-times for social security**, and a **lack of trust in the state**.

REDUCED ACCESS TO HEALTH AND CARE SERVICES

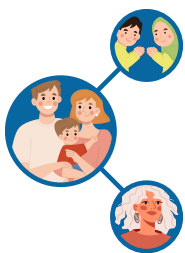
In conversations, we heard how **Covid-19** and the **cost-of-living crisis** have acted as a one-two punch to our **health and well-being**. Four years on from the first national lockdown, the stark health inequalities revealed by the pandemic remain a concern for many civil society organisations – exacerbated by new ways of working, budgetary cuts, and a healthcare system on its knees

“DISABLED PEOPLE HAVE BEEN FORGOTTEN” – OPEN DAY PARTICIPANT

Cuts to opening hours, closing of services, and staffing shortages make **accessing care** difficult for all, but some face more barriers than others. **Inaccessible, discriminatory and digital (including telephony) services** act as barriers to many older, disabled and migrant communities. **Inability to access health and care services** leads to long term and complex physical and mental health issues. In these spaces civil society organisations are having to step in as informal advocates and interpreters, providing where the state does not.

NOT EXPERIENCED EQUALLY

Across our open days we heard that issues of reduced support from local and public services including health and care services doesn't affect everyone equally. As services tighten their purse strings universal access to basic public services decreases and on the sharp end of this are people who face discriminatory structures. In London, groups who shared their experiences of inequality in access and quality of services with us were:



- people in recovery from or in active addiction
- Disabled people
- people with mental health issues
- migrants and people seeking asylum
- racialised communities

- women
- older people
- LGBTQ+ communities
- children and young people
- people who experience language or cultural barriers.



IMPACT ON COMMUNITY GROUPS IN LONDON

Increasing poverty and decreasing public budgets are forcing community groups to step into new spaces. As well as filling in the gaps left by local authorities, civil society organisations who may previously have specialised in issues outside of poverty are finding they must take up roles as crisis managers, sign posters, and advisors alongside their 'everyday work'.

Overworked and underfunded, these organisations struggle to provide the support needed.

“THE COMMUNITY LITERALLY DOESN'T HAVE THE ENERGY TO FIGHT”
– OPEN DAY PARTICIPANT

PART 2: THESE ARE RIGHTS ISSUES. THEY NEED A RIGHTS RESPONSE

At our open days we heard how the pressure of rising costs and decreasing support from the state are impacting communities in London. We heard that communities are exhausted and feel they've tried everything.

We do not think that human rights law is a magic wand, many of these issues are deep rooted and systemic.

However, we know from our work over many years that raising issues as human rights matters can be a powerful tool for advocacy by communities and can lead to positive change, big and small. Upholding human rights set out in domestic and international law is not something extra or nice to do, but about basic minimum protections that we are all entitled to and can advocate for. Human rights also provide us a way to look at the twin issues of increasing inequality and decreasing support and their impact holistically.

Below we map the issues raised by communities in London and their impact to human rights protections to support readers to understand and use the law in their conversations about these issues.

THE RIGHT TO HEALTH, TO WELL-BEING AND TO NON-DISCRIMINATION

Community groups told us that poverty, inequality and a lack of service provision impact on the health and well-being, both physically and mentally, of communities.

These are rights protected by human rights law both internationally and domestically. Internationally through the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ([ICESCR](#)) which the UK Government has signed and ratified (made official). Domestically, through our Human Rights Act ([HRA](#)) which brings the rights in the European Convention into Human Rights (ECHR) into UK law.

The right to the best standard of health possible (ICESCR, international law)




Under Article 12 of ICESCR everyone in the UK has the right to the **best standard of health possible** – both physical and mental. The UK Government has committed to take steps to ensure this, including things like **providing functioning public health care that is available and accessible to all**, making sure children can **grow up healthily, and ensuring the environments we live and work in are not harming our health**.

The right to health includes a measure called ‘progressive realisation’. This means that, as a signatory to ICESCR, the UK Government must always be trying to move forward and make progress ensuring people have this right, to the maximum extent they can with the resources they have.

[The UN Factsheet on the Right to Health](#) lays out some important things about this right including:

-  The right to health includes things like access to health care and the building of hospitals, but it also includes wide range of **factors** that can help us **lead a healthy life** like safe drinking water and adequate sanitation, safe food and adequate nutrition and housing.
-  The right to health contains **freedoms**, including the freedom to say ‘no’ to medical treatments.
-  The right to health contains **entitlements** like equal and timely access to basic health services and participation of people in health-related decision-making at the national and community levels.
-  Health services, goods and facilities must be provided to all **without any discrimination**.
-  All services, goods and facilities must be **available, accessible, acceptable and of good quality**.

The right to well-being, dignity, relationships and non-discrimination (Human Rights Act, domestic law)

-  Under Article 8 of the HRA (and ECHR), everyone has a right to private, family life, home and correspondence. Included under the private life element of this right are lots of the essential things we need to keep us healthy and well both mentally and physically. This right protects our **well-being and dignity related to living conditions and our right to have a say in decisions about our body and life**, i.e. what care or treatment we want to receive and protection from forced medical treatment.
-  This right also protects **our relations with other human beings** which is key to keeping us well and alongside the right to be free from inhuman and degrading treatment (Article 3 HRA/ECHR). This right sets out that children and other members of society in vulnerable positions, for example people with mental health or capacity issues, must benefit from state protection where their physical and mental well-being are threatened.
-  Importantly, this right is often read alongside the **right to be free from discrimination** (Article 14 HRA/ECHR) which exists to protect people from being treated in a worse way than others due to discriminatory structures or attitudes. For example, you shouldn't be denied the health care you need, or the autonomy to make health care decisions because of discriminatory attitudes or processes e.g. because the information has not been provided in a way that you can understand.

The UK Government are under a positive obligation to take appropriate measures to **protect the life and health** of everyone in the UK. The Human Rights Act says that there shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of these Article 8 rights except where they are in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society. In London, we see that neither the UK Government nor public services are living up to these commitments, enabling challenge on this basis.






THE RIGHT TO AN ADEQUATE STANDARD OF LIVING – INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO ADEQUATE FOOD AND TO BE FREE FROM HUNGER

The right to an adequate standard of living (ICESCR, international law)





Under Article 11 of the ICESCR everyone in the UK has the right to an **adequate standard of living** for themselves and their family – this includes **good food, housing, and clothing**. The UK Government has committed to taking steps to ensure this right – including ensuring everyone in the UK is **free from hunger** and able to **access food supplies fairly**.

Like the right to health, the right to an adequate standard of living includes ‘progressive realisation’.





To look at little closer at some aspects of the right to an adequate standard of living, the [UN clarifies](#) that the minimum requirements for **adequate housing** under the ICESCR are:

-  security of tenure
-  adequate lighting, heating and sanitation
-  habitability
-  location from which health and education services are accessible, including the provision of adequate infrastructure
-  cultural adequacy.

The UN also [makes it clear](#) that the **right to adequate food** should ‘not be interpreted in a narrow or restrictive sense which equates it with a minimum package of calories, proteins and other specific nutrients’, but should be:

-  available in sufficient quality and quantity to satisfy dietary needs
-  free from adverse substances
-  culturally acceptable
-  accessible, both economically and physically.

The right to life, to be free from serious harm and to autonomy and dignity (Human Rights Act, domestic law)

-  The right to an adequate standard of living, to food and to be free from hunger cannot be viewed in isolation of other human rights. Importantly, under UK law, public bodies have a legal duty to take reasonable steps to protect life when someone is at risk of malnutrition or dehydration (Article 2 HRA/ECHR).
-  This is alongside a legal duty to ensure people are free from inhuman and degrading treatment which covers any action or lack of action by the state that causes serious mental or physical harm (Article 3, HRA/ECHR), e.g. the failure to provide adequate housing or healthcare.
-  Under the HRA, public bodies must protect individuals who are directly and seriously affected by the quality of their surrounding environment, e.g. environmental issues and noise pollution to ensure quality of life. This can include access to safe drinking water where there has been a persistent and long-standing issue affecting health and human dignity. Public bodies in the UK must also ensure the quality of life of disabled and older people and ensure autonomy and dignity for anyone interacting with the state (Article 8, HRA/ECHR).
-  The HRA also sets out that everyone should be able to access these rights without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status. (Article 14, HRA/ECHR).

We therefore have multiple human rights protections supporting an adequate standard of living, including those which are binding under UK law and have been considered by the courts. Together these protections enable us to assess whether public authorities, by their actions or inactions, are failing to protect people's human rights. This in turn, opens up avenues of challenge in your advocacy around adequate standards of living issues using both international and domestic law.

HUMAN RIGHTS: BRIDGING THE GAP

We want people to feel able to assert their power as individuals and in the community. Equally, we need public officials to acknowledge our communities' needs and strengths, to champion participation and accessibility, and to work alongside London's community groups.

We believe human rights can help us do this, because human rights call on us to treat people with fairness, respect, equality and dignity – to invite people in and respond to them as a whole person. And they are more than just nice ideas; they are protected in law.

While we know that human rights are not a magic wand. We believe they are a key foundation in building a future where every person can lead a life of freedom and dignity, and we can start using human rights to build that future now.

Knowing and claiming our rights is not always about quoting case law or taking someone to court. It is also about having the confidence to challenge decisions – such as by our GPs, local authorities or schools – and speaking up against unfair treatment. Talking about rights, understanding them and claiming them is important, especially now when so many are facing disadvantage and discrimination, and being shut out of the public conversation.

Just Fair and the British Institute of Human Rights support organisations to use rights in their work, to hold decision-makers to account, and see the bigger picture – in London and beyond.



FURTHER READING

If you would like to use human rights in your own work and life, a great place to start is to check out our new resources:

1) What are human rights:

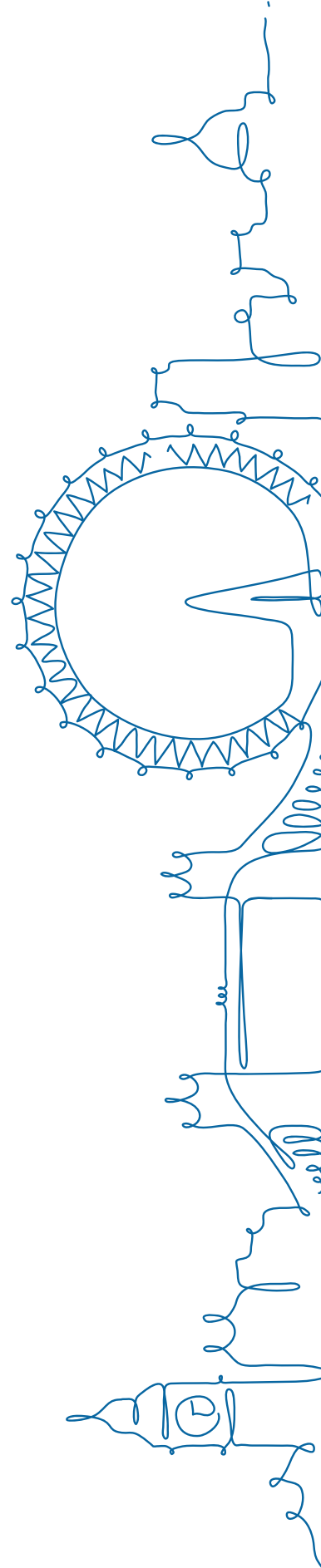
This resource introduces rights under the HRA and ICESCR, the concepts that underpin them and the laws that protect them. It is designed to help civil society activists in the UK claim 'the right to talk about rights' and feel more confident to start conversations in communities about taking rights-based approaches to address the issues that matter to them.

2) The value of using human rights:

This resource introduces human rights framing – the process of putting human rights at the centre of our campaigns and everyday conversations and calling for them to be at the forefront of policy and practice. It shows how understanding human rights not just as legal concepts, but as tools we can use in our communities, as activists and within our organisations to strengthen our campaigns can help to change harmful narratives, alleviate suffering, and help to hold the UK Government and public authorities to account.

3) Stories of a human rights-based approach:

This resource introduces 'rights-based approaches' and provides examples of when taking a human rights-based approach has helped organisations and activists to make change. Integrating a rights-based approach into policymaking, as well as the day to day running of organisations, ensures that standards are met for everyone: so that rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled.



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